The Era of Dark Passions

By David Brooks

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Sometimes when I have nothing better to do, I think back on the elections we had in the before times — when, say, Mitt Romney ran against Barack Obama or John Kerry ran against George W. Bush. I try to figure out why politics and society in general felt so different then.

It's not because we didn't have big disagreements back then. The Iraq war kicked up some pretty vehement arguments. It's not because we weren't polarized. Pundits have been writing about political polarization since at least 2000 and maybe well before.

Politics is different now because something awful has been unleashed. William A. Galston defines this awful thing in his fantastic new book, "Anger, Fear, Domination: Dark Passions and the Power of Political Speech." Even before the Charlie Kirk assassination it was obvious that the dark passions now pervade the American psyche, and thus American politics.

A core challenge in life is how do you motivate people to do things — to vote in a certain way, to take a certain kind of action. Good leaders motivate people through what you might call the bright passions — hope, aspiration, an inspiring vision of a better life. But these days, and maybe through all days, leaders across the political spectrum have found that dark passions are much easier to arouse. Evolution has wired us to be extremely sensitive to threat, which psychologists call negativity bias.

Donald Trump is a man almost entirely motivated by dark passions — hatred, anger, resentment, fear, the urge to dominate — and he stirs those passions to get people to support him. Speaking before a CPAC conference in 2023 he warned of "sinister forces trying to kill America," by turning the nation into a "socialist dumping ground for criminals, junkies, Marxists, thugs, radicals and dangerous refugees that no other country wants."

Trump is a master of this dark art, but I wouldn't say my Trump-supporting friends have darker personalities than my Trump-opposing ones. Progressives also appeal to dark passions. A decade or so ago I had a poignant conversation with a Democratic ad-maker who was anguished because to help his candidates, nearly every ad he made was designed to arouse fear and animosity. "The thing people forget is that the political left were really the ones who perfected the politics of anger," the left-wing social organizer Marshall Ganz told Charles Duhigg for an essay in The Atlantic in 2019. "It's the progressives who figured out that by helping people see injustice, rather than

just economics, we become strong." Michael Walzer, the eminent co-editor emeritus of the progressive magazine Dissent, put it clearly, "Fear has to be our starting point, even though it is a passion most easily exploited by the right."

We in the media appeal to those passions too. One of our jobs is to motivate you to click on our headlines. A team of researchers from New Zealand looked at headlines from 47 American publications. They found that between 2000 and 2019, the share of headlines meant to evoke anger more than doubled. The prevalence of headlines meant to evoke fear rose by 150 percent.

I want to understand how dark passions are ruling us, so let's take a quick look at each one:

Anger. Anger rises when somebody has damaged something you care about. Anger can be noble when directed at injustice. But the seductive thing about anger is that it feels perversely good. It makes you feel strong, self-respecting and in control. Expressing anger is a dense form of communication. It lets people know, quite clearly, that you want something to change. The problem is that these days we don't have just bursts of anger in our public life. Anger has become a permanent condition in many of our lives.

Hatred. You can be angry at someone you love. Hatred, on the other hand, is pervasive. As Galston writes, "We feel anger because of what someone has done, hatred because of who someone is." The person who hates you wants to destroy you. Antisemites hate Jews. During the Rwandan genocide, the Hutus hated the Tutsis. "Hatred cannot be appeased," Galston continues, "it can only be opposed."

Resentment. Resentment is about social standing. Someone makes you feel inferior to them. Someone doesn't offer you recognition and respect. Resentful people are curled in on themselves. They can't stop thinking about and resenting the people who are so lofty that those other people may not even know they exist. Anger is often expressed, but resentment is often bottled up because the person in its grip feels powerless, socially inferior.

Fear. Fear is healthy when it alerts you to some real threat. But as the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has noted, "Fear is at its most fearsome when it is diffuse, scattered, unclear, unattached, unanchored, free-floating, with no clear address or cause." When that happens fear turns into a feeling of existential menace that doesn't lead to any clear course of action. When fear turns into terror, it makes rational deliberation almost impossible. When

people can't locate the source of their fear, you never know who they will lash out at and blame; you just know that a scapegoat will be found.

The Urge to Dominate. This is the one we talk about least, but it is the darkest of the dark passions, the most omnipresent and the most destructive. St. Augustine called it libido dominandi. It's the urge to control, to wield power over someone, to make yourself into a god. It is often driven by repressed anxiety, insecurity and a fear of abandonment that causes people to want to establish their power in every situation. It exists in personal life and causes some people to try to manipulate you, interrupt and talk over you. In families, it leads to overbearing parenting, conditional love, boundary violations and isolation tactics — cutting someone off. In intellectual life, it causes some people to want to dominate reality, to impose their own false view of the truth on everyone around them. People with a strong urge to dominate can't stand the condition of doubt. They want to impose brutal certainties and crude simplifications.

Politics is about power, so of course it attracts people with a strong libido dominandi. When that urge is combined with what psychologists call a "dark triad" personality type (Machiavellianism, narcissism and psychopathy), you wind up with some pretty brutal characters — Hitler, Mao, Stalin.

In public life the urge to dominate can take brutal forms. When you see cops beating a man who is on the ground and barely conscious, that's the urge to dominate. It can also take more subtle forms. I'm struck by how powerful the human urge to segregate and exclude is. For example, once left-leaning people established a dominant position in academia, the media and nonprofit sector, they mostly excluded conservative and working-class voices. They wanted control.

Dark passions are part of our nature, like keys on a piano. If we're bombarded with speech that presses the dark keys, antipathy will rise. When people consume communication that demonstrates respect, curiosity, communion and hope, antipathy falls. The problem is that dark passions are imperial. Once they get in your body, they tend to spread. Dark passions drive out the good ones.

Today American politics is driven by dueling fears, hatreds, resentments. If liberal democracy fails, it will be because a variety of forces have undermined the emotional foundations on which liberalism depends. Dark passions lead to heartlessness, cruelty, violence, distrust. Sticks and stones can break your bones, but words that arouse the dark passions can kill you.

America's founding fathers spent a lot of time thinking about dark pas-

sions. Samuel Adams declared that humans are driven by "ambitions and lust for power." Patrick Henry confessed that he had come to "dread the depravity of human nature." John Jay declared, "The mass of men are neither wise nor good." They preferred democracy because they didn't trust one man or one small group of people to hold power. They thought it more prudent to spread power around, and then in the Constitution, imposed all sorts of ways to check human desire.

Since then, and especially over the last 60 years, there has been a great loss of moral knowledge, a naïveté about and ignorance of dark passions. "Sinful" used to be a powerful, resonant, soul-shaking word. Now it is mostly used in reference to desserts. "When I think back to my years of growing up in the 1950s," Andrew Delbanco once wrote, "I realize that this process of unnaming evil, though it began centuries ago, has accelerated enormously during my lifetime."

How did we get so ignorant about the struggle between light and dark forces within us? Well, religion is all about that struggle, and religion plays a smaller role in public life. After World War II, an array of thinkers, including those in the self-esteem movement, argued that human nature is essentially good. If there's evil in the world, it's out there in social structures, not in ourselves. In the 1950s and 1960s, psychology became the primary way people understood themselves. The psyche replaced the soul and symptoms replaced sin. Then we privatized morality. Schools, for example, got out of the moral-formation business and into the career prep business. We told successive generations to find your own values, find your own truth. That's like telling someone to find your own astrophysics. If we don't have teachers and leaders guiding us through the long human tradition of moral knowledge, we're going to wind up pretty damned ignorant.

This mass ignorance has produced obliviousness. All day we are consuming spiritual nutrients that either make us a little more elevated (that documentary about Mr. Rogers) or a little more degraded (porn and sports gambling) and yet our culture seems blind to this everyday contest. Most of all this ignorance has produced naïveté about human nature, a blithe innocence about the forces that arouse dark passions and what those passions can lead to. For example, many people now believe that democracy means majority rule. The founders, who were much wiser about human nature than we are, were under no illusions about the horrors and atrocities majorities could do when in the grip of dark passions. That's why they built in the checks and balances now being shredded.

There is one force above all others that arouses dark passions, and we possess it in abundance: humiliation. People feel humiliated when they are not granted equal standing and when they have been deprived of something they think is their right. And as we all know, pain that is not transformed gets transmitted. Humiliated people eventually lash out.

Humiliation drives world events. Germany was humiliated at the end of World War I. The Arab world was humiliated after its defeat in the Six Day War. Russia was humiliated by its defeat in the Cold War. The China scholar William Callahan wrote, "The master narrative of modern Chinese history is the discourse of the century of national humiliation."

Humiliation produces horrors at home. Since the Columbine shooting we've had a long string of humiliated and solitary men brooding over their insults and then finding a psychic solution through the gun. Over the last 60 years the educated elite has created a meritocracy, an economic system and a cultural atmosphere that serves itself and leaves everybody else feeling excluded and humiliated. Over the last 30 years the richest, whitest and best-educated members of our society have become the most extreme people on the right and the left and began a war on each other that leaves all sides feeling furious and fearful. I'm not the only one to wonder if history would have been different if then-President Barack Obama hadn't humiliated Donald Trump at a White House Correspondents' Association dinner.

So to return to my original question: Why does politics feel so different now than in times past? My short answer is that over these years, demagogues in politics, in the media and online have exploited common feelings of humiliation to arouse dark passions, and those dark passions are dehumanizing our culture and undermining liberal democracy. My intuition is that we're only at the beginning of this spiral, and that it will only get worse. How can we reverse our downward trajectory? First, let me tell you how not to reverse it. There is a tendency in these circumstances to think that the other side is so awful that we need a monster on our side to beat it. That's the decision Republicans made in nominating Trump. Democrats are moving in that direction too. Back in 2016 Michelle Obama asserted that Democrats to go high when Republicans go low, but the vibe quickly shifted. As former Attorney General Eric Holder put it in 2018: "When they go low, we kick 'em. That's what this new Democratic Party is about." If Republicans soil our democracy with extreme gerrymandering in Texas, Gavin Newsom and the Democrats will soil our democracy in California.

The problem with fighting fire with fire is that you're throwing yourself

into the cesspool of dark passions. Do we really think we won't be corrupted by them? Do we really think the path to victory lies in becoming morally indistinguishable from Trump? Do we really think democracy will survive? Surveys consistently show that most Americans are exhausted by this moral race to the bottom and want an alternative; do we not trust the American people?

I often hear Democrats say their party needs to fight harder. These are people who don't really believe in democracy. Fighting is for fascists. Democracy is about persuasion. Democrats would do well to get out of their urban and academic bubbles and understand the people they need to persuade and then persuade harder.

History provides clear examples of how to halt the dark passion doom loop. It starts when a leader, or a group of people, who have every right to feel humiliated, who have every right to resort to the dark motivations, decide to interrupt the process. They simply refuse to be swallowed by the bitterness, and they work — laboriously over years or decades — to cultivate the bright passions in themselves — to be motivated by hope, care and some brighter vision of the good, and to show those passions to others, especially their enemies.

Vaclav Havel did this. Abraham Lincoln did this in his second Inaugural Address. Alfred Dreyfus did this after his false conviction and Viktor Frankl did this after the Holocaust. You may believe Jesus is the messiah or not, but what gives his life moral grandeur was his ability to meet hatred with love. These leaders displayed astounding forbearance. They did not seek payback and revenge.

Obviously, Martin Luther King Jr. comes to mind: "To our most bitter opponents we say: We shall match your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We shall meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will, and we shall continue to love you. We cannot in all good conscience obey your unjust laws, because noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. Throw us in jail, and we shall still love you."

Obviously, Nelson Mandela comes to mind. Far from succumbing to dark passions, he oriented his life toward a vision of the good. "During my lifetime," he said near the beginning of his imprisonment, "I have dedicated my life to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against white domination, and I have fought against Black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons will live together

in harmony and with equal opportunities."

This kind of interruption is the most effective way to fight dark passions. Though it's true that humans are deeply broken, we're also gloriously made. We're wired not only to dominate, but also with the bright passions too: the desires for belonging, justice, meaning, understanding and care. Moral life is a struggle over which parts of ourselves we will develop. Political leadership is a struggle over which motivations the society will develop. The British writer Henry Fairlie put it well, "At least if we recognize that we sin, know that we are individually at war, we may go to war as warriors do, with something of valor and zest and even mirth."

Galston, who is a political theorist, revives the ancient tradition that emphasizes that speech and rhetoric have tremendous power to arouse or suppress these passions. When we choose our leaders we are not only choosing a set of policies but the moral ecology they create with their words. He also points out that in the early 2000s, as millions of manufacturing jobs went away, the national leadership class barely stopped to notice.

I'd add only that in order to repress dark passions and arouse the good ones, leaders need to create conditions in which people can experience social mobility. As philosophers have long understood, the antidote to fear is not courage; it's hope. If people feel their lives and their society are stagnant, they will fight like scorpions in a jar. But if they feel that they personally are progressing toward something better, that their society is progressing toward something better, they will have an expanded sense of agency, their motivations will be oriented toward seizing some wonderful opportunity, and those are nice motivations to have.

The dark passions look backward toward some wrong committed in the past and render people hardhearted. The bright passions look forward toward some better life and render people tough-minded but tenderhearted.

YouTube video Watch Obama roast Trump:

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`projector=1`